

The last word: fretting about film criticism

by the editors

In January, 2010, Armond White, chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle and movie reviewer for the *New York Post*, gave a speech at the group's annual awards banquet. Subsequently he adapted the remarks into an article published in *First Things* in April.^[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) White used the occasion to sound several commonplaces of recent years: “real” film critics get no respect for their “expertise”; the Internet offers instead “an alternative deluge of fans’ notes, angry sniping, half-baked impressions, and clubhouse amateurism”; upstart bloggers with “adolescent taste” are ruining everything with “the viral graffiti on aggregate websites such as Rotten Tomatoes;” and so forth. The *First Things* editors note,

“With movie luminaries such as Meryl Streep, George Clooney, Jeff Bridges, Mo’Nique, Katheryn Bigelow, and others in the audience, White’s remarks were met with stony silence.”

Not having been there, it’s hard to agree automatically with the implication that those Hollywood types are insensitive to critical thinking and don’t accept White’s assertion,

“We [critics] judge movies because we know movies, and our knowledge is based on learning and experience.”

(And Streep, Clooney, Bridges, and Bigelow don’t know movies and don’t have knowledge based on learning and experience?) Of course, some other considerations might pertain here. After all, the NY film critics present also joined the “stony silence.” And since award speeches are usually given after a cocktail hour and a dinner, the audience might expect a convivial welcome rather than a self righteous scolding.

Several things accelerated this new trend of considering (and pontificating about) film criticism. Some of the attendant confusion stems from “film criticism” being an elastic category that ranges

- from scholarly academic considerations of cinema aesthetics—in university press books and peer-reviewed journals,
- through mainstream cultural and evaluative essays—usually in the weekly and monthly publications,
- to basic journalistic reviews and consumer guides—again, newspapers, weeklies and daily online sites such as *Salon*, radio and TV commentaries, etc.,
- to blogs—ranging from the informed and researched through the fanboy and amateur sites,
- to the retail purchaser feedback at IMDb.com and Amazon.com,
- all the way to the crassest “pay attention to me” narcissism and snark.

Some writers are only interested in “movies,” that is the current feature entertainment scene, while others pay attention to the entire range of cinema: its entire history, all its modes and genres, all nations, and all its creative forms. Given that there’s a spectrum of activity and overlap in both intention and effect, it’s clear that a certain jostling for position will take place among writers.

Drawing from film studies, a number of online journals, including *Jump Cut*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Film and Philosophy*, *Rouge*, *Bright Lights*, and *Screening the Past*, publish mostly academic, footnoted film criticism, but a large number of film lovers mingle with film studies academics in blogging about film, television, new media, and the mass media in a larger sense. Part of the usefulness of following these bloggers is that they enter into a thoughtful dialogue with each other both about individual film texts and about cultural issues. For example, Roger Ebert, whom Armond White surely would have to acknowledge as a “real” film critic, has invited online writers to enter into what has become a many-faceted conversation on the topic of “Can videogames be art? [2] Bloggers and their readers include film enthusiasts, film teachers, and other media people; they include those actors and critics who met White’s remarks with silence. In fact, this group of people has become a niche audience, seeking out film festivals if they live in larger cities or encountering a wider range of international cinema by using mail order rental, through distributors such as Netflix. Understanding this audience, one such distributor, Aaron Hill of Green Cine, maintains two thoughtful blogs, one about more recent cinema and one about DVDs.[3] Just as Armond White did not understand the changes going on in film distribution, and thus audiences’ needs for film criticism, he could not understand why online film criticism now plays an important role both for distributors and viewers, especially the film lovers. Not only do people turn to the Internet to read about a film they might rent/see, they enjoy reading various reviews in one sitting. In this way, a major appeal of film blogs lies not just in their articles but in how they present blog rolls, the links on the side of the page—to other film bloggers, to online media journals, to interesting recent online articles, etc.

Part of the anxiety that seems to underlie the anger that White expressed

comes from his denial of contemporary media economic history. In this case, the actual decline in the number of movie reviewers goes along with the gradual decline of print journalism. Not only are there cutbacks at daily newspapers, even well respected veterans such as Todd McCarthy, who has been at *Variety* for 30+ years, are losing their jobs. While their jobs are secure, even among some tenured professors, it seems that there's suspicion that their version of film study is giving way to television, new media, and other platforms for screen arts (ironic since those same folks were often seen as unwelcome interlopers when introducing popular culture in humanities departments 30 and 40 years ago). In Fall 2008 *Cineaste* created a "Critical Symposium" on film criticism in the age of the internet, further worrying about the matter as they gingerly entered cyberspace with a site for their overflow from their print edition. And managing to somehow overlook *Jump Cut's* substantial (and free) presence on the net for many years. (Hmm, seems like Armond White isn't the only one who is annoyed by not getting his proper respect.)

Brandeis University film professor Thomas Doherty stirred the pot with a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in February entitled "The Death of Film Criticism." [4] In the process of reviewing some recent books he characterized the current state of the art as caught between an older belles lettres tradition of the literary and thoughtful critical essay and the new media world of instant analysis and the consumer democracy of the marketplace. Doherty in turn stirred up a few grumpy retorts on the *Chronicle* and various blogs. *Salon* movie reviewer Andrew O'Hehir in a later piece characterized the opposed sides thus:

"Subsequent exchanges...degenerated into name-calling and accusations of ethical malfeasance: Critics over 40 are grumpy, outmoded graybeards, running late for the 4:30 dinner special at Denny's! Critics under 40 are balls-sucking festival shmooze-whores with no morals and no education, who think Pasolini designs sunglasses!" [5]

There was a moment in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s when the cinema was a place that provided an alternative to Eisenhower America and the Cold War limits on imagination. Your *Jump Cut* co-editors participated in that, and it shaped our passions and careers and why we started the publication. It's easy to become nostalgic about how things have changed. Part of the reflection is occasioned by the passing of figures who added so much to the critical analysis of film, such as the late Robin Wood, who was eulogized in the heavy duty Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. [6] And the desire to survey film criticism also connects with the fact of recent significant collections such as *Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber*, (NY: Library of America, 2009) and Philip Lopate, *American Movie Critics: From the Silents until Now* (NY: Library of America, 2008) In addition, we seem to have now reached a certain point of development where some people actively look back to the origins to assess where we are and how

we got there. Thus several recent books take up the development of academic film studies, such as Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds. *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and the U.K. study by Terry Bolas, *Screen Education: From Film Appreciation to Media Studies* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009), and Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley, U of California Press, 2007).

From the long view, and from a broader view of a spectrum of writing on film and media arts, Armond White's anxieties seem to be based on thinking of film criticism as a zero-sum game: bloggers and impertinent upstarts are taking up his rightful space. But there have always been many types of and outlets for criticism; it's just that today so much more of what's out there can circulate farther and faster. And readers have always used criticism in different ways for different purposes: as a raw consumer guide, or as general information on what's going on, or as education in thinking about film as an art.

It's the fancifully elevated view of film criticism's mission that seems so peculiar in White's diatribe. Not that writers can't or shouldn't aspire to take what they are doing seriously and try to inform and enlarge the audience's taste. But White tries to remove criticism (or at least his kind) totally from the market, and that really can't be done. To use Pierre Bourdieu's categories from his study of taste, *Distinction*, while the film critic may not have much economic capital, the critic does have cultural capital, and that can sometimes be parlayed into a form of economic capital. And to be fair to White, he's constructed his image as a critic precisely as an iconoclast and contrarian (e.g., praising de Palma's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, finding Michael Jackson's *This Is It* a great film). Though it's hard to tell if his inclusion of his own book in answering the *Sight and Sound* poll of the five most important film books ever.[7] was intended as ironic wit or overweening pride: in any case, it gets attention, which always has some practical currency.

Journalist film critics are paid for their work, either in salary or by the word in the mainstream, and in perks like free press screenings and screener DVDs for the groundlings. Establishing a web presence, especially a steady blog, gets you the attention of PR hacks who will flood you with freebies, including (for those playing the game well) possible junkets. Anyway, there's always the pleasure of flaming others on listservs, and the chance to shout loudly (if not very cleverly) in public. In any case, you can't vault over the contradictions of a market economy, but you can recognize them, and perhaps laugh at them and what they do to skew even the most idealistic of aspirations.

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